



# Town of Lexington

## Police Department

**Subject:** Death Scene Investigation

Reference: none

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Annually

**By Order of:** Mark J. Corr, Chief of Police

**Policy &  
Procedure**

# 42K

*The Municipal Police Institute, Inc. (MPI) is a private, nonprofit charitable affiliate of the Massachusetts Chief's of Police Association. MPI provides training and model policies and procedures for police agencies. This policy is an edited version of MPI Policy 2.09, "Dead Bodies."*

## GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Death can be classified into five categories:

1. Lawful homicide (lawful self-defense, by soldier in time of combat, etc.);
2. Unlawful homicide (murder, if malice is present or legally inferable, manslaughter if the element of malice is not present; although provocation is in no way the equivalent of justification, such as lawful self-defense);
3. Suicide;
4. Accidental death; and
5. Natural death.

Although it is the function of the police to determine whether any crime may have been committed which caused or contributed to the death of a human being, the medical, scientific and forensic training and expertise needed to determine the cause of any death necessitates that the Medical Examiner play a major role in this process. The General Laws prescribe the duties and authority of the Medical Examiner in relation to taking charge of the body of the deceased, conducting searches and examinations and providing for the removal and disposition of the body.<sup>i</sup> In addition, the same statute defines the role and responsibility of the District Attorney's office in these circumstances.

## **42K- Death Scene Investigation**

It is the policy of the Lexington Police Department to:

1. Preserve dead bodies until the Medical Examiner authorizes removal, preserve surrounding environs for possible crime scene investigation and make all appropriate notifications promptly; and
2. Diligently pursue all appropriate investigations into criminal activity surrounding a death.

### **PROCEDURE**

#### **A. Responding Officer**

1. An officer who discovers or is dispatched to the scene of an apparent or unattended death shall:
  - a. Immediately evaluate the victim and attempt resuscitation if there is any possibility of reviving the victim;
  - b. Request medical assistance to treat the victim or pronounce the victim deceased, if not already en route; and
  - c. Attempt to obtain a dying declaration if the person is near death or dying.
2. If the person is obviously dead, the officer should be aware of the following responsibilities:
  - a. Secure the scene.
  - b. Clear the largest area possible.
  - c. Secure and isolate the crime scene if one exists.
  - d. Secure a larger area for police personnel conducting the investigation.
  - e. Begin a "Crime Scene Sign-in Sheet," recording the name, agency, date and time of all persons entering the inner crime scene.
  - f. Notify the Commanding Officer.
  - g. Notify the Patrol Supervisor and/or Detectives.
  - h. Request medics to examine the deceased and make a pronouncement of death.

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3. Officers at the scene shall be observant for persons foreign to the scene or behaving in a suspicious manner.
4. The responding officer should obtain information for a preliminary investigation and report. Such information should include:
  - a. The date and time of his/her arrival;
  - b. Decedent's name, address and age;
  - c. Any known medical conditions;
  - d. Any known medications;
  - e. The date and time of the last interaction with others and the identity of last person to see or speak with the decedent;
  - f. Location and condition of the body;
  - g. Any unusual circumstances, body position, injuries, or articles in relation to the body;
  - h. Next of kin;
  - i. The names and addresses of witnesses;
  - j. The names and time of arrival of officials responding to the scene;
  - k. Any "Do Not Resuscitate" order (DNR);
  - l. If the death was anticipated or unexpected; and
  - m. Name and telephone number of the funeral home requested by family for when the body is released by the medical examiner.
5. A police officer shall remain at the scene until relieved.

### B. Notifications

1. Medical Examiner
  - a. M.G.L. Chapter 38 § 3 states, the medical examiner shall be notified of the known facts concerning the time, place, manner, circumstances and cause of the death when any person is found dead.
  - b. If the Medical Examiner accepts jurisdiction; once on scene [s]he has the lawful right to take charge of the deceased.<sup>ii</sup>
  - c. Officers shall cooperate and coordinate their efforts with those of the Medical Examiner and the District Attorney.<sup>iii</sup>
  - d. The Medical Examiner may take charge of any money or other personal property of the deceased found on or near the body, or may ask the department to take charge of the property.<sup>iv</sup>

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- e. Property of the deceased, which is not evidence, shall be delivered to the person entitled to its custody and possession (usually the next of kin or other appropriate person) by the medical examiner or the police department.
- f. Property may be held in the event that it is required as evidence.<sup>v</sup>
- g. For further information, see the department policy **83B- Property & Evidence Control**.
- h. If the Medical Examiner declines jurisdiction after being advised of the circumstances the officer will:
  - i. Document the Medical Examiners name and time of decline for the report,
  - ii. Assist the family members for as long as practical in making arrangements (contacting funeral home, clergy, etc.), and
  - iii. Complete an officer's investigative report.

### 2. District Attorneys Office

- a. In cases of unnatural or suspicious death, the District Attorney or his/her representatives (State Police Detectives Unit assigned in each county to the District Attorney's Office- formerly known as CPAC) shall also be notified and have the authority to direct and control the criminal investigation of the death.<sup>vi</sup>
- b. District Attorney's Office Responds: In the event that the District Attorney's representative responds to the scene of the death, department detectives shall assist those investigators.<sup>vii</sup>
- c. In the event that the District Attorney's representative declines to respond, Lexington Police Detectives shall conduct a complete investigation, which may include:
  - i. Photographs of the scene and the body;
  - ii. Any evidence;
  - iii. Observations of officers and detectives; and
  - iv. Information on attempts to identify, locate, and interview all persons who had contact with the deceased person during the period immediately before his/her death or disappearance.
  - v. A copy of all reports and photos shall be forwarded to the District Attorney's representative.

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3. Assessment: Lexington Detective(s) responding to the scene of a death in conjunction with the preliminary reporting officer shall:
  - a. Speak with the responding officer to obtain information about the deceased and the circumstances of death, if known.
  - b. Make observations of the scene for evidence that may indicate the likelihood that a criminal act resulted in the death.
  - c. Speak with friends, family, witnesses, or other involved persons.

### C. Moving Dead Bodies

#### 1. Generally

- a. A dead body, regardless of the cause of death, shall only be moved at the direction of the Medical Examiner or District Attorney.
- b. The Medical Examiner may require a specific funeral home to respond.
- c. In the event that the body is released by the Medical Examiner, a funeral home of the decedent's family's choosing should be considered, if practical.

#### 2. Exigency

- a. A body may be moved by the police when one of the following circumstances exists:
  - i. A badly mangled body open to public view may be covered. Officers should consider the consequences of forensic contamination to the body prior to covering it.
  - ii. If the death is due to a traffic accident and the remains create a traffic hazard, the body may be relocated to a nearby suitable site.
  - iii. If the dead body is found in the water, it may be removed to the nearest suitable shelter.
  - iv. The body may be moved when the Medical Examiner is unable to respond in an expeditious manner and after consultation with the District Attorney.
- b. Before moving a body, the police personnel should:

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- i. Document all facts relevant to the appearance, condition and position of the body;
- ii. Document facts and circumstances tending to show the cause and circumstances of death; and
- iii. If possible, the location shall be marked and the body and scene photographed prior to moving.<sup>viii</sup>

### D. Statutory Provisions Relating to Dead Bodies

1. If the Medical Examiner examines a dead body and is of the opinion that the death may have resulted from injuries sustained in a motor vehicle accident, and the death occurred within four hours of the accident, and the deceased was the operator and sole occupant of the motor vehicle, and no other individuals were involved in the accident, the Medical Examiner shall take a blood sample and submit it for analysis to the State Police laboratory.<sup>ix</sup>
2. Transportation of bodies of persons who have died from any disease dangerous to public health must be in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Department of Public Health.<sup>x</sup>
3. An officer who has reasonable cause to believe that a child under the age of eighteen (18) has died as a result of abuse, including sexual abuse, or from neglect, including malnutrition or from physical dependency on any addictive drug at birth, shall report the death to the Department of Children & Families (DCF), to the appropriate superior officer, to the Middlesex District Attorney's Office and to the Medical Examiners Office.<sup>xi</sup>
4. A search warrant may be obtained for the purpose of searching for the dead body of a human being.<sup>xii</sup>
5. Officers should be aware of the following are crimes:
  - a. Unauthorized disinterring, removing or conveying of any human body or the remains thereof,<sup>xiii</sup>
  - b. Buying or selling or possession with intent to sell any dead body of a human being,<sup>xiv</sup>
  - c. Willfully destroying, mutilating, defacing or removing any tomb, monument, gravestone or other structure as a memorial to the dead;<sup>xv</sup>

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- d. Wantonly or maliciously disturbing the contents of any tomb or grave;<sup>xvi</sup>
  - e. Unauthorized removal of gravestones and other memorials;<sup>xvii</sup>
  - f. Other acts of desecration of any place of burial.<sup>xviii</sup>
6. The discovery of any unidentified dead body shall be reported to the Department of Public Safety, Criminal Justice Information System (C.J.I.S.) and National Crime Information Center (N.C.I.C.) It shall also be reported to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Unknown Dead File (via the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System, Inc. - NLETS). Refer to operations manuals for C.J.I.S., N.C.I.C. and NLETS for input format and procedures. (See department policy **42J- Missing Persons**.)

### E. Contact Information

#### 1. Medical Examiners Office

Medical Examiner  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
720 Albany Street  
Boston, MA 02118  
(617) 267-6767 Toll free in Massachusetts (800) 962-7877  
FAX (617) 266-6763

#### 2. Middlesex District Attorneys Office (CPAC)

Middlesex District Attorney's Office  
15 Commonwealth Avenue  
Woburn, MA 01801  
Phone (781) 897-8300

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<sup>i</sup>M.G.L. c. 38

<sup>ii</sup> M.G.L. c. 38, § 4.

<sup>iii</sup>M.G.L. c. 38, §5.

<sup>iv</sup> M.G.L. c. 38, §15.

<sup>v</sup> M.G.L. c. 38, §15.

<sup>vi</sup> M.G.L. c. 38, § 4.

<sup>vii</sup> M.G.L. c. 38, §4.

<sup>viii</sup> M.G.L. c. 38, §4.

<sup>ix</sup>M.G.L. c. 38, §4A.

<sup>x</sup>M.G.L. c. 111, §107.

<sup>xi</sup>M.G.L. c. 119, §51A.

<sup>xii</sup>M.G.L. c. 276, §1.

<sup>xiii</sup>M.G.L. c. 272, §71.

<sup>xiv</sup>M.G.L. c. 272, §72.

<sup>xv</sup>M.G.L. c. 272, §73.

<sup>xvi</sup>M.G.L. c. 272, §73.

<sup>xvii</sup>M.G.L. c. 272, §73A.

<sup>xviii</sup>M.G.L. c. 272, §74.